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DEVOTEES EMBRACE 'THE HUGGING SAINT'

Hundreds flock to see humanitarian Amma

By Eric Kurhi
CONTRA COSTA TIMES
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CASTRO VALLEY -- At the remote Mata Amritanandamayi Center on the outskirts of Castro Valley on Tuesday, the shoeless masses waited patiently in line.

Many huddled on their knees, inching forward bit by bit toward the woman known as the hugging saint. The center bears her full name, but she's better known simply as "Amma."

She hugs, thousands of times a day, for hours. She won't stop hugging until the last person seeking an embrace gets one.

"Seven years ago, she changed my life with a hug," said Nihsima Sandhu, a volunteer at the center. "When my sister and I were in her arms, we cried and cried. We grieved the loss of our mother when we didn't even know the pain was still there."

It is not an uncommon reaction. Many people were in tears before they even reached Amma; some broke down afterward. Others seemed dazzled, starstruck by the 53-year-old humanitarian who is considered a living saint in her southern India homeland.

The hugging was not always such a hit. The daughter of a poor fisher, Amma turned to charitable works at an early age.

While still in her teens, she became determined to start a mission of love.

But public affection was a big taboo. For a woman, even a holy woman, to physically contact others via a hug was unheard of.

Despite her detractors, Amma persevered, and the message grew, and, supporters say, it continues to grow.

It is said that Amma has hugged 40,000 people in a single sitting -- and more than 26 million in her lifetime.

Advertisement Rob Sidon met Amma while vacationing in India.

"I was very impressed," he said. "It wasn't so much just the hug, it was the whole philosophy, the humanitarian effort behind it. Amma is walking the talk."

She has, indeed, been very active in charitable programs. If the hugs are a bit of an abstract expression, Amma's humanitarian efforts have yielded concrete results.

Her programs have raised orphanages, schools and a 1,300-bed hospital and shelter for thousands of victims of the 2005 tsunami in Indonesia. She made a million-dollar donation to the Hurricane Katrina fund. And earlier this year, Amma vowed to raise \$46 million to help farmers in central India, where an economy devastated by drought has led to an epidemic of suicides.

"I was bowled over," Sidon said. "I wanted to know what I could do."

Sidon has been the press liaison for Amma for a decade now.

He's one of many who have been similarly inspired.

Sandhu said that before meeting Amma, she had a well-paying job "in the corporate world."

"When I met Amma, I was seeking a purpose," she said. "And it was a prayer that was heard so fast ... She made me realize that I wanted to work with women and children."

Sandhu now is a jewelry designer and plans to create jobs for women in India, making jewelry and donating proceeds to orphans.

Judy White of Oakland received a hug from Amma for the first time Tuesday. She waited for about three hours and didn't have a life-changing experience, but she said she was glad she came.

"It was tranquil," she said. "I didn't understand what she said, but I could feel she's a very loving person."



Audio Slideshow
Amma the Hugging Saint

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White said she would likely return.

So did David Badstubner, 17, of Arnold. He traveled with his girlfriend and her mother for the experience.

"It was very peaceful," he said. "It was weird -- I felt my heart start beating really fast. It just feels good."

Reach Eric Kurhi at 925-847-2184 or ekurhi@cctimes.com.

IF YOU GO

- WHAT: Amma, the hugging saint, gives blessings
- WHEN: Sessions begin at 10 a.m. and 7:30 p.m. through June 13. Also, a retreat June 12-15.
- WHERE: M.A. Center, 10200 Crow Canyon Road, Castro Valley
- CONTACT: <http://www.amma.org>

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